Christopher Pledges Action on Reports of U.S. Wrongdoing in Guatemala

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Secretary of State Warren Christopher said yesterday that neither he nor President Clinton knows whether the U.S. intelligence community was involved in wrongdoing in Guatemala but pledged prompt action against any U.S. official implicated in misconduct there.

Christopher said allegations made in recent days about possible U.S. links to several murders in Guatemala were "disturbing" and said, "What I think we need to do here is to urgently [find out] . . . what the facts are, because I must say I am not sure of them at the present time, nor is the president."

Christopher told the House International Relations Committee that Washington plans to press the Guatemalan government "to undertake a full investigation" of the two murders because "part of these facts will have to come from" officials there.

The Guatemalan officials so far have denied any wrongdoing, and Christopher did not say how the administration would obtain their cooperation. U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala Marilyn McAfee began pressing the Guatemalan government last month to interrogate its military officials, but little useful information has been produced so far, officials said.

At the heart of the administration's concern are allegations made to Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) on Tuesday that the Army and the National Security Agency knew about two murders in Guatemala at the time they occurred. One involved U.S. innkeeper Michael DeVine, who was found dead and nearly decapitated in 1990; the other involved guerrilla fighter Efraim Bamaca Velasquez, who was apparently killed in July 1992.

The allegations, which were made to Torricelli in an unsigned letter on National Security Agency stationery, included a charge that U.S. Army personnel may have been involved in the murders and that employees of the NSA and Army were trying to conceal their roles by shredding documents.

Torricelli said yesterday that the FBI, which opened a probe of the allegations Wednesday, informed him that on Thursday it had received a separate document saying that documents were being shredded at the NSA. An administration source, however, said there was no evidence that the FBI had received such a communication.

After the administration on Wednesday ordered an inquiry as a result of the letter to Torricelli, FBI agents went to NSA headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., that night to make sure that information pertaining to operations in Guatemala were secure, a source familiar with the investigation said. NSA officials secured the material by removing the people who would have had access to the information, the source said.

Based on the initial results of the investigation, the source expressed skepticism over the claims in the anonymous letter to Torricelli. "I'd be surprised if there is merit," the source said, because some details do not support the allegations.

For instance, the letter said an Army colonel, Daniel D. Day, was purging certain records.

But the source said Day was not currently in a job that deals directly with Guatemala. The Pentagon declined to provide biographical information about Day.

The latest allegations about the Army and NSA came after officials said earlier that a Guatemalan colonel linked to the two killings had been a paid CIA informer.

Clinton, asked in Tampa whether he thought the CIA had covered up the killings in Guatemala, said he had "no information to that effect."

Clinton continued, "We are looking into all the allegations, and I have taken exceptional steps to make sure that there is a good investigation and to make sure that the records are secure. . . . As you know, this relates to events that occurred before I became president. But we need to know the facts, and we're going to do everything we can to find out the facts."

Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said yesterday that the NSA, a Defense Department agency, has asked its inspector general "to review the handling of documents, material [and] databases that may relate to this case" and that the Army has launched an internal investigation.